

## ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY

*"Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from? ... They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Revelation 7: 13,17*

I was driving from Belmont to Arlington the other day when I noticed a billboard outside a church. It said, "Christians are not pure and innocent. They are guilty and forgiven." And I thought: *that's one church I have no desire to visit.*

First, why the "they"? This was a Baptist Church, so who are the *they* they're talking about? Are they not Christian? Are they not including themselves in their own billboard theology? And if they're not including themselves, what about the rest of us?

I have no doubt that, on the strictest level, this theology is correct. Christians are not perfect and innocent, that's for sure. Nobody is perfect, and nobody is entirely innocent...we've all committed sins and errors, we all fall short of the mark of the Great Commandments, let alone the lesser ones.

I can also agree totally that we are all forgiven. I believe, and count on, the wideness of God's mercy. I have felt that mercy profoundly in my own life, and have observed, with amazement and gratitude, how the recognition and acceptance of that forgiveness works in the lives of those around me.

And since innocence and guilt are opposites, I suppose we are all guilty. I can admit that too. But I don't walk around all the time aware of

feeling guilty. I don't operate with a constant sense of my inadequacy and failures. I certainly did at one dark period of my life. But I've gotten that out of my system, thanks to the healing power of the Church, and of my favorite saint, George Herbert, and, overwhelming, thanks to the healing power of God.

I don't walk around feeling guilty. And I hope and pray that no one I care for, and care about, walks around that way. I'm hesitant to say that I know the mind of God, but I'm as sure as I am of anything that God does not want us to be consumed with guilt, or to have as a tagline of our faith and practice that "we are guilty." I've seen, painfully, the kind of damage that this guilt theology does to people's spiritual lives, and I want no part of it.

So, I didn't want to go into that church somewhere on Route 60. And I didn't feel invited; I felt excluded, just by the billboard. I could be completely wrong; I might have found a congregation filled with the joy and gratitude of forgiveness, instead of one focused on sin and guilt. But I have no desire to risk it. My intuition was that it would be an empty place, empty of joy and, actually, of forgiveness.

And I want any church I'm in to be crowded. That's why I love All Saints' Sunday so much. Today, of all days, our church, and all churches who celebrate this feast, are crowded. Crowded with saints: saints past, saints present, and saints to come. That's why I chose the icon we sent around with our invitation to dress as your favorite saint. The icon was crowded with saints. All those beautiful robes! All those haloes! Even some bishops!

I've been reading some post-Freudian psychology lately, and pondering how more recent theorists imagine "the self", and how that

thinking relates to our Christian theology and the Communion of Saints. Instead of presuming that “a person” is a freestanding, isolated, autonomous individual, each of us separated one from another by a chasm or an empty space, we can be seen as all participating in an intricately overlapping tapestry of selves. Well-being and illness, growth and stagnation, then are understood to occur not within us as isolated individual but in the in-between, in the relationships that make us.

Our physical bodies may be convenient markers, but our “selves” are not confined to that marker alone. The space between our bodies is not a vacuum for the transfer of energy among independent selves, but rather, the space between is a space of intersecting and overlapping. A space that can be very holy space. (Slauch, *Faithful Companionship*, paraphrase)

How many times have we heard people say that they’ve found healing and wholeness by coming here to St John’s? I know I have, just as I found healing and wholeness when, many years ago now, I began attending All Saints’ Church in Belmont. My first understanding of that healing was indeed as a very separate and isolated individual, a lonely person who found sanctuary in a place where I could afford to feel my sad and fearful feelings in safety and begin to move beyond them. But my real healing came from the relationships I made there, with the priest, the parishioners, and with God.

The space between bodies in those pews—in these pews— was not empty space. It was— it is— holy space, space where energy gathers collectively throughout time and space, and blesses us with the healing touch of love. *For as in one body we have many members ... so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another*, St Paul tells us.

And on this holy day we welcome and celebrate not only the members of the Body of Christ, the saints, whom we can see here, but all those saints, past, present and to come, who inhabit our holy space, who bless us with the healing touch of love.

Alleluia, alleluia!

Amen